

impose those ideas backed by the mighty dollar. But it's very clear where these editors and advertisers draw their lines. If they really wanted girls to love their bodies, they'd give them a few more shapes and colors to choose from, they'd provide articles exploring some of the real reasons why a girl might plow through a box of Oreos one moment, yak her guts out the next, and then zone in front of the television for 16 hours a day. If they can be so brazen about teaching a girl how to kiss the boy of her dreams, they can teach her how to kiss a girl. They just won't. [1996]



## Gender in the Media

MARIELENA ZUNIGA

### MEDIA: NOT A GIRL'S BEST FRIEND

Whether it's barely dressed women displayed in magazines, the treatment of women in the political arena, or the "bitches and ho's" portrayed in rap and hip-hop music—sexist ideas and imagery abound in the mass media. In magazines, film, TV, radio, and even within the field of print and broadcast journalism itself, women either are portrayed in sexist or stereotypical ways or are missing in great numbers.

In a Dolce & Gabbana magazine ad, for example, a scantily clad woman with spike heels is pinned on the ground by her wrists by a bare-chested man while four other men look on. Public outcry eventually forced Dolce & Gabbana to pull its "fantasy gang rape" ad. But it served its purpose—publicity and sales, which are key to advertisers who want to grab the public's attention and pocketbooks.

The connection between the economics and the messages women and girls and men receive can't be separated, says Carolyn M. Byerly, Ph.D., department of journalism, Howard University in Washington, D.C.<sup>1</sup> "The pattern we see, then, is that women are told they need to be thinner, wear certain kinds of clothing, which in Western countries

helps sexualize women," Byerly says. "It tells them there's something wrong with them, with the person they are and the body they were born into. If you have a strong, intelligent woman who wants to make her own way through life, who wants to be head of her class or government, who wants to exert her intelligence in some way—these things are downplayed when women are emphasized for their sexuality and allure."

And when it comes to the media's coverage of female politicians, the treatment is blatantly sexist. When Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton took the step of becoming a viable female candidate for president in the United States' 232-year history, this incredibly accomplished woman was reduced to sexist stereotypes.

She was slammed for wearing a perceived low-cut blouse. Her legs were too fat. Her suits too boring. Her voice too screechy. News pundit Tucker Carlson portrayed Clinton as castrating, commenting, "Every time I hear Hillary Clinton speak, I involuntarily cross my legs."

Many other examples exist of powerful women leaders being defined by sexist stereotypes. Condoleezza Rice, when chosen by U.S. President Bush as national security advisor, was featured in a front page *New York Times* story about her clothing selection—that she preferred comfortable pumps and conservative jewelry and even had two mirrors on her desk to check the front and back of her hair.<sup>2</sup>

"The problem is that the media covers female politicians as if they're ladies first and leaders a distant second," says Jennifer Pozner, executive director of Women in Media & News (WIMN), a media analysis, education, and advocacy group in Brooklyn, New York. "What that does in terms of shaping public opinion is very damaging to the notion that women are competent, effective leaders."<sup>3</sup>

### WHERE THE GIRLS AREN'T

The flip side of the media's sexist treatment of women and girls is their lack of representation. In early 2008, researchers from all over the U.S. and the world gathered in California for a conference presenting research about the representation

of females in films and television. The event was sponsored by the Los Angeles-based Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (GDIGM), a non-profit working to increase awareness of gender imbalance in the media and develop strategies to change media portrayals of women and girls.<sup>4</sup>

Academy Award winner Geena Davis (who played the first female U.S. president in the now-defunct TV series *Commander in Chief*) founded the Institute after watching children's television and videos with her then two-year-old daughter and noticing a remarkable imbalance in the ratio of male to female characters. At that conference, Davis said: "Whatever environment we're in on TV, it's nothing near the 50 percent we are in the world. Girls see this imbalance and realize 'I'm not important.' Women have presence and space in this world."

A conference overview of female portrayals on U.S. television pointed to more recent programs with stronger female characters, such as *Cold Case*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Law and Order*. Even with progress, however, research studies from the GDIGM show that both TV and film suffer from an underrepresentation of females. Today, the on-screen ratio of females to males is still only one in three, up from one in five two decades ago.

According to recent research by the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, only 29.9 percent of the 4,379 speaking characters identified in films were female, while 83 percent of all directors, writers, and producers were male.<sup>5</sup> "Our findings show a representational roadblock for females in film," said Stacy L. Smith, communication professor who led the study. "They do not occupy 'half of the cinematic sky'—far from it. There is a dearth of females working in the movie industry no matter which way you look at the data."

When girls are represented, they are valued first for appearance, and second for inner character, if at all, says Crystal Cook, the GDIGM's former director. These were the findings in a GDIGM study of 13 top-grossing children's films with female leads produced between the mid-1930s through 2005, many of them from Disney. Plots of the extreme

makeover and romance were strong in movies such as *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Anastasia*, and *The Little Mermaid*. Only one character wasn't looking for "happily ever after" with a prince charming—and that was Dorothy Gale from *The Wizard of Oz*.<sup>6</sup>

The GDIGM's studies also found that females are more than five times as likely as males to be shown in alluring apparel. The institute is not only concerned about how these messages affect women and young girls, but young males as well. It's just as important for males to see females as capable, valued for their character, and their stories as being worthwhile, Cook says.

"Males grow up to be the companions, employers and employees of women," she adds. "As young children, they are the playmates and schoolmates of girls. Patterns for lifelong behaviors begin when we are very young children and it's important for both girls and boys to see girls taking up space and being important from the youngest ages forward."

### MULTIPLICITY OF IMAGES MISSING

Complex portrayals of both genders in film and TV are also important, Cook adds, because males can also be "stereotyped into being bumbling, ineffective, as distant dads or as overly aggressive." However, television has always portrayed a multiplicity of men in various characters, such as fathers and workers of all kinds, says Amanda D. Lotz, Ph.D., of the department of communication studies at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and author of *Redesigning Women: Television After the Network Era*.<sup>7</sup>

What's still missing on television is a multiplicity of images that show the diversity of women, such as characters that are lesbian, not white, in stable relationships or lacking rewarding careers, she says. "In some ways we've come 180 degrees with women portrayed overwhelmingly in career roles, but we don't see working-class women on TV very often," she says.

The lack of substantial roles for women of a certain age in Hollywood also concerns women's rights advocates. A documentary, *Invisible Women* sponsored by a grant from the Screen Actors Guild Foundation, spotlights the diminished careers of

female actors who find themselves “pink-slipped” at 40, and includes interviews with, among others, Susan Sarandon and Christine Lahti.<sup>8</sup> “If characters in pop culture are not reflecting women over 40, it makes it even easier for employers to express biases—to put you into a little box based on gender stereotypes,” Janice Grackin, a social psychology professor at Stony Brook University, New York, stated in a *Newsday* article.<sup>9</sup>

### WOMEN OF COLOR

In addition, women of color are scarce in female leads, especially in film, says Cook. They also are “virtually invisible as experts and news sources,” Pozner adds, and whether in news or entertainment, they are “deprived of any kinds of roles that speak to positions of power.”

In film, radio, and television, women of ethnic backgrounds continue to be blatantly missing. According to a 2010 study released by the Motion Picture Association of America, women go to the movies more than men. Despite that fact, Hollywood continues to be a male-dominated industry, with actresses of color faring the worst. Only one movie released by Paramount in 10 years starred an actress of color—Queen Latifah in *Last Holiday* (2006). Out of 30 lead actresses, only one actress—Queen Latifah—was a person of color.

In Hollywood and many other areas of the mass media, Asian women are often portrayed as “China dolls” and as exotic, subservient, compliant, and eager to please. This stereotype is epitomized by the self-effacing title character of the opera *Madame Butterfly*, but it can also be seen in works like *Teahouse of the August Moon*. Another major female stereotype views Asian women as inherently scheming, untrustworthy, and back-stabbing. This portrayal is often named the “dragon lady,” after the Asian villainess in the vintage comic strip *Terry and the Pirates*.

On prime-time cable new programs, more than three-quarters of the hosts are white men and less than a quarter are white women. None of the hosts are people of color. Latinos were particularly underrepresented. Though they now comprise 15 percent of the American population, they made up

only 2.7 percent of cable news guests, according to Media Matters for America.

At daily newspapers, women and people of color remain under represented. Nearly 90 percent of reporters/writers and newsroom supervisors are white and about two-thirds are male. Women make up only one-third of the top 100 syndicated opinion columnists in the U.S. Just three of the top 10 op-ed writers are women.

### GENDER/MEDIA PICTURE WORLDWIDE

The situation isn’t much better globally. At the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the Platform for Action declared that “the print and electronic media in most countries do not provide a balanced picture of women’s diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world.” In addition, it stated that “violent and degrading or pornographic media products are also negatively affecting women and their participation in society.”

Despite the Platform for Action, women’s voices are still largely absent from mainstream media. A media monitoring study carried out by 12 southern African countries found that stereotypes abound and are actively promoted by the media. The worse culprits, however, are in the Middle East where 98 percent of stories uphold gender stereotypes.<sup>10</sup>

Another report titled “The Gender of Journalism” found that even in a female-friendly nation such as Sweden, “journalism as a field has remained male-dominated.” And in Spain, women are far from achieving equality “even in the most ‘feminized’ sectors of culture, such as literature,” according to another report about women and culture.<sup>11</sup>

In 2009, volunteers in 108 countries across the world as part of the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) spent much of the day pouring over national newspapers, listening to radio newscasts and watching television news to provide a snapshot of the representation and portrayal of women and men in news media.<sup>12</sup>

The report revealed that the agenda of the news media was not very different from information recorded in 2005. Women are still five times as likely to be portrayed in their roles as wives,

mothers, etc., with women continuing to be under-represented as experts providing comments based on specialist knowledge of experience and spokespersons on behalf of organizations. In other words, 11 years into the new millennium, news stories are six times more likely to reinforce gender stereotypes than to challenge them, according to the GMMP.

The media in Asia, for instance, continue to focus on an idealized version of beauty. When Fabienne Darling-Wolf, Ph.D., lived and taught in Japan in 1995, more than 50 percent of models in Japanese magazines were white, she says. A professor in the department of journalism at Temple University in Philadelphia, Darling-Wolf focused her dissertation on Japanese women and their representation of attractiveness in the media. Her research found that in Japan's media-saturated society, magazines and "trendy dramas" (the equivalent of Latin America's telenovelas) all portrayed white and Westernized versions of beauty and appearance.<sup>13</sup>

"When I conducted interviews about this for my research, all the women were quite assertive about not liking the fact that there were White models in their magazines. They said, 'This does not fit us.' They were very adamant it was a bad thing," she says. "Since 1995, you look at Japanese magazines and you have fewer Western models but you have Japanese models who look Western."

The Japanese media also are notorious for pushing the starving beauty trend, where ideals of thinness and weight have become an obsession. Research points to the media-weight connection in the United States as well. One study found the amount of time adolescent girls watch soap operas, movies, and music videos is associated with their degree of body dissatisfaction and desire to be thin. In another study, 10-year-old girls told researchers they were unhappy with their bodies after watching a music video by Britney Spears.

"Many women feel they have these unrealistic standards the media has set to live up to in order to be wanted by a man," wrote another blogger on Ask Amy. "It's no wonder anorexia and depression affects so many young girls these days!"

One Canadian report, however, found that not all young women and teens were so easily influenced. They voiced everything from disappointment to annoyance and disgust at the media's portrayal of their gender. "As I get older, I'm trying to be a lot more comfortable with myself rather than trying to look at the images and say, 'I wish I was like that,'" a 21-year-old Ottawa student told CanWest News Service. "You're trying to figure out who you are, but there are some girls still trapped in that mindset—they're trying to be what the image on TV is telling them."

### ***BEHIND THE SCENES, ON THE SCREEN***

One reason women and girls suffer from negative portrayals in the media—if they're portrayed at all—has to do with whether women have access to authority and ownership levels in media. "We have to really understand how news is made, how TV programs are made, how films are made, and we have to look at the politics and economics of these," says Howard University's Byerly. "We have to understand that public policy has an awful lot to do with that."

More media mergers means fewer people are setting policies and their values trickle down through their main industries. In December 2007, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the U.S. voted to allow greater consolidation in media ownership, despite vocal opposition from consumer groups and women's rights organizations.

Whenever the FCC allows big media conglomerates to gobble up more stations, it leaves fewer outlets for women to purchase, and the voices and viewpoints of women and people of color are even further marginalized. Today, women own only 6 percent of commercial broadcast television stations and full power radio stations.

There is also a dearth of female ownership in the entertainment industry, adds Cook, formerly of the GDIGM. "Although there are many more women in executive positions than before, women still lag greatly behind men in creative positions that hold power, such as writer, director and producer." Of the 150 films nominated for best picture from 1977 to 2006, only a handful were directed by women,



including *Awakenings* by Penny Marshall, *The Piano* by Jane Campion, and *Little Miss Sunshine* by Valerie Faris.

In 2010, however, a woman broke new ground at the Academy Awards. Kathryn Bigelow became the first woman in Oscar history to win the Best Director Award for her film *The Hurt Locker*, about a bomb-disposal team in Iraq. Bigelow called it “the moment of a lifetime.” In total, the film garnered six Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

If anything, Byerly would like to see concerned women of all perspectives refocus or shift their attention to those who produce content in media. “It’s important to keep writing and documenting and complaining about what we don’t like,” she says. “But I can tell you these things aren’t going to change until we restructure industries and until women move into more decision-making positions in media.”

And it will be up to women to make that happen. Dismayed at the way Hillary Clinton had been portrayed, supporters drafted language into the Democratic platform standing up against sexism and all intolerance. It reads, “Demeaning portrayals of women cheapen our debates, dampen the dreams of our daughters and deny us the contributions of too many.” [2011]

#### NOTES

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### *Bitches and Morons and Skanks, Oh My!: What Reality TV Teaches Us About “Women”*

JENNIFER L. POZNER

Women are bitches. Women are stupid. Women are incompetent at work and failures at home. Women are gold diggers.

How do we know? Because reality TV tells us so.

Media is our most common agent of socialization, shaping, and informing our ideas about people, politics, and public policy. Just ask Mike Darnell, the bottom-feeder suit at Fox who brought us such classy celluloid concoctions as *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire*, *Joe Millionaire*, and *Temptation Island*. The secret to his ratings success, he once told *Entertainment Weekly*, is that his series are all “steeped in some social belief.”

If you, like most people, think reality TV is harmless fluff, Darnell’s admission should give you pause. When it comes to women, the “social beliefs” that reality producers, writers, and editors exploit are both anachronistic and toxic. According to a decade of “unscripted” (but carefully crafted) television, women are desperate, pathetic losers who can never possibly be happy without a husband—and it’s hilarious when they get mocked, dumped, or punched in the face. We’ve learned that women of color are violent, ignorant, “ghetto” whores; bisexuals and lesbians only enjoy making out in view of horny male onlookers; and men must always beware of manipulative, money-grubbing gold-diggers. Meanwhile, fresh-faced teens, hard-working moms, and professional powerhouses alike all received the same memo: the only thing that really matters is how you look in a bikini.

That’s just the beginning. What else do reality TV producers, writers, editors, and advertisers want us to believe it means to be a “real” woman today?